

Using Real Middle School Dilemmas for Case-Based Professional Development

***This We Believe* Characteristics**

- Educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so
- Courageous, collaborative leadership
- A shared vision that guides decisions
- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
- High expectations for all members of the learning community
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning

By K. Denise Muth, Nicholas C. Polizzi, & Shawn M. Glynn

Jen just read to the class a short essay she had written for homework, but as she was reading, I realized that the words that were coming out of her mouth were not her own. I'd been teaching middle grades social studies for five years in an affluent county just outside of Washington, D.C.; the school system is one of the largest in the nation with more than 150,000 students, 234 schools, 20,000 employees, and an annual operating budget of more than \$1.5 billion dollars. This affluence provides each classroom with the latest in teaching resources and technology; each classroom in the entire county, from kindergarten through grade 12, has computers with Internet access. The students love learning about everything from ancient history to current events; however, using information on the Internet properly requires a good sense of ethics. The case I'm going to share with you is about an incident involving plagiarism by Jen, one of my students.

The preceding paragraph is the beginning of a sample professional development case that we present later in this article. The names are pseudonyms, but the case is based on an actual incident experienced by the second author. The case begs the question: How do middle school teachers, particularly new ones, learn to cope with

the dilemmas that routinely arise throughout the day? What type of professional development will best help them?

The National Middle School Association (2003) has provided a vision for reform in the area of professional development in *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*. Successful schools for young adolescents are characterized by teachers who are continually engaged in



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Teachers examine a document related to the case they are studying as part of their personalized professional development.

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professional development and a culture that includes students who are engaged in active learning. Middle school teachers have been encouraged to view themselves as lifelong learners engaged in a collaborative process of improving their teaching practices and content knowledge. In response to the vision in *This We Believe*, we have explored a number of activities for professional growth and have found those activities associated with case discussions to be particularly useful. Our goal in this article is to describe how to use actual events, or dilemmas, for case-based discussions to facilitate the professional development of middle school teachers. We begin by describing cases and the important role they can play in the professional development of middle school teachers. Next, we discuss guidelines for using dilemmas to write cases and share them with colleagues. We end by presenting the dilemma involving plagiarism by Jen and describing how it can be used to promote professional development.

Professional Development Cases

A professional development *case* is a narrative about a significant event (e.g., a student bullying another) that leads to a dilemma and may involve teachers, students, parents, and administrators. Although relatively new to the field of education, the use of cases as a teaching strategy actually began in 1870 at Harvard Law School and, by the 1920s, became the prevailing method of legal education. The case method eventually spread to other fields such as business, medicine, engineering, and education, with each field tailoring it to its special needs. The popular television show *House* exemplifies the use of cases in the medical profession. Cases may be *open-ended*, describing an event that leads to an unresolved dilemma, or *closed*, describing an event and how the dilemma was resolved. Open-ended and closed cases can be equally effective, as long as they lead to a productive discussion.

Professional development cases usually involve dilemmas designed to stimulate shared inquiry, reflection, critical thinking, and problem solving. An extensive body of research supports the use of case discussions when learning how to solve complex problems in education (Lundeberg, Levin, & Harrington, 1999). This process of discussing cases can provide new middle school teachers with instructional, emotional, and managerial support (Scarpaci, 2007; Silverman, Welty, & Lyon, 1992;

Siskind, 2000). Case discussions can benefit seasoned teachers and administrators as well, providing a means for addressing professional development.

Ideally, a case should be based on an actual event. At the same time, confidentiality and ethical considerations are paramount when considering a case. Pseudonyms should be substituted for real names, unless the names and events are public knowledge. Sample dilemmas that could be developed into excellent cases are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Sample Case Topics for Middle School Teachers

1. Rachel is teaching a sixth grade science lesson when one of her students, Jimmy, screams a swear word at another student who threw some terrarium gravel at him.
2. A middle school teacher walks into an otherwise empty classroom to find an eighth grade boy and girl holding each other and kissing.
3. Martin is reviewing a mathematics test that many of his eighth-grade students did poorly on. One of the students says, "But this was unfair because you didn't teach us some of these problems. How many people think this was unfair?" Most of the students in the class raise their hands in agreement.
4. Elena, who is teaching a seventh grade social studies lesson, doesn't know how to respond when one of her students asks her if she thinks it's ok for two men to be married to each other.
5. A mother whose seventh grader is having real difficulties with mathematics homework calls the teacher two or more evenings a week for advice on how to help her child. When the teacher tells the mother that several calls a week are too many, the mother then calls the principal to complain about the teacher.
6. A popular sixth grade girl accuses an unpopular girl of stealing her bracelet during a gym class. The other students tell the physical education teacher and demand that something be done about it.
7. During a team planning session, two middle school teachers argue about whether effort should be taken into account in grading students or whether the grades should be based solely on performance.
8. Recurrent bruises on a sixth grade boy leads a middle school teacher to suspect that the student may be being bullied by other students or abused at home.
9. On an Internet blog, an eighth grade student compares his social studies teacher to Adolph Hitler.
10. A Spanish language teacher's insistence that her eighth grade students speak only Spanish during language class frustrates many of her less fluent students and leads to complaints from their parents.
12. A middle school principal receives several complaints from parents about a teacher who they believed was celebrating "Christmas" because the teacher decorated her classroom with holly wreaths and colored lights during December.
13. A middle school teacher enters the school auditorium to find two boys fighting viciously on the ground and a circle of boys around them shouting encouragement.
14. A middle school teacher's coaching responsibilities make it difficult for him to spend time with a struggling student teacher who was assigned to him.
15. Darlene, a middle school student who receives special education services, often calls herself "dumb" when talking to other students. Darlene's teacher wants to say something to Darlene about it, but isn't sure what to say and how to say it.

Role of Cases in Middle School Professional Development

A traditional approach to middle school professional development has been to bring in outside experts to lecture and answer questions during inservice workshops. But what about the *inside* experts? Case discussions capitalize on the expertise of the teachers within a middle school. After all, they are the ones who know their school best and know the conditions that prevail there. Case discussions exemplify the type of work-embedded professional development that Hirsch (2004) recommended because they “make professional learning a part of every teacher’s workday” (p. 207).

Teachers can use case discussions to help prepare for their students’ questions about highly controversial topics such as the origins of the universe, evolution of life, the best form of government, and constitutional rights.

Case discussions also facilitate the sharing of strategies and the middle school philosophy. In addition, case discussions are ideally suited to help teachers grapple with the complex issues that confront them daily. Middle school teachers can use case discussions to effectively prepare themselves for challenging issues related to teaching methods, curriculum design, assessment, evaluation, student motivation, student safety, and legal responsibilities. They also can use case discussions to help prepare for their students’ questions about highly controversial topics such as the origin of the universe, the evolution of life, the best form of government, and constitutional rights, to name only a few.

The interdisciplinary team organizational structure of the middle school makes an ideal setting for sharing and discussing cases. Additionally, cases are an excellent example of the type of professional development that Brown (2001) advocated for “eliminating team isolation, loss of objectivity, and competition” among middle school teachers (p. 65).

Posing Dilemmas: Writing and Sharing Cases

Middle school teachers and administrators who wish to pose a dilemma as a case usually begin by writing it up in the form of a narrative, with dialogue similar to that in a screenplay or film script. Incorporating dialogue makes the case more realistic and engaging than a simple summary of facts. Perhaps the easiest way to write a professional development case is to think of it as telling a story about a teaching dilemma that you experienced and that still puzzles you. The descriptive information you provide should include thoughts and feelings as well as actions. Figure 2 provides detailed guidelines for writing successful cases.

The cases are then presented by dramatically reading them to a small group of teachers and administrators; we have found four to eight to be a good group size. Smaller groups tend not to generate enough meaningful discussion and larger groups are often too impersonal, making some group members reluctant to speak up.

Figure 2
Guidelines for Middle School Teachers
on How to Write a Case

1. Brainstorm and write down a list of teaching dilemmas that you’ve experienced.
2. Rank order the dilemmas and pick the one that you think would be the most interesting for other teachers to read and discuss.
3. Write down what happened as if you were writing a short story and include the dialogue. If you’re having trouble finding the right words, you might begin with, “One day at school...” (You can take it out later). Don’t worry how your writing sounds just yet; just try to write as many details as you can remember.
4. After you’ve written your first draft, take a walk, check your e-mail, or plan tomorrow’s lesson; just clear your mind of what you’ve written.
5. When you’re done revising your first draft, pretend that this dilemma happened to someone other than you and read what you have written objectively. Is your dilemma clear? Would other teachers “get” what’s going on in your case? Have you left out details that might help others understand your dilemma more clearly? Flesh out your case by adding these needed details.
6. Edit your case for all the things you ask your students to look for: sense, organization, word choice, spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Also, remove any personal identifiers.
7. Time to be brave. Ask colleagues and friends to read your case and give you feedback. Does your case peak their interest? Based on this feedback, revise your case.
8. Read your case one more time objectively. Do you feel that it will spark a good discussion among the teachers at your school? If yes, then congratulations, you’ve written a good case! Now share it with other teachers in a case-discussion group. You also can share it by means of professional conferences, newsletters, magazines, and journals.

In our experience, the presenter typically assumes the role of case facilitator—that is, he or she is responsible for ensuring that the case discussion is a valuable professional development experience for all participants. Figure 3 highlights the key responsibilities of the facilitator. Cases can be presented by other means as well, such as having different people read different dialogue parts and by acting and role-playing. Cases also can be presented by means of video and interactive software.

In summary, a good case provides a bridge between theory and practice in middle school teaching. It helps teachers to build upon their experience, to better understand important issues, and to view the issues from the perspective of each other, fostering mutual respect. A good case poses a specific dilemma that is credible, engaging, and challenging. Usually, there is more than one way to respond effectively. That is because many of the situations in which middle school teachers find themselves are ambiguous, unpredictable, and downright confusing. These situations are not unique to middle school teachers—elementary and high school teachers experience them, too, and that is why case discussions are useful for all teachers. In such situations, there may be multiple responses that are effective, and the best ones often depend upon a thorough understanding of the local conditions. The following open case exemplifies such a situation and illustrates how it can be turned into a professional development case.

A Case of Intellectual Dishonesty: Jen Plagiarizes from the Internet

My class of sixth grade social studies students was studying the Civil War and was in the middle of a unit on primary sources. The previous day, I gave the students a homework assignment to write a one-page letter from the perspective of either a Union or Confederate nurse, cook, musician, infantryman, general, or cavalryman to someone in their home state on the eve of the Battle of Antietam. The students were free to choose the letter content and recipient, so long as it was appropriate for the time and place.

That morning, I called on various students to share what they had written. While sitting at their desks, the students sequentially read aloud their short letters to their imaginary husbands, wives, and siblings. One boy even wrote to his dog,

which got a lot of laughs! When it was time for Jen to share her letter, I anticipated something creative based on her past work. Jen liked to share her writing, and the class enjoyed her expressiveness.

“It’s your turn, Jen; let’s hear your letter, please.”

I noticed that Jen moved a bit in her seat, her eyes shifted away, and she looked uncomfortable.

“Do you have the assignment, Jen?” I asked. Jen usually does her homework, unless there is a good reason, like illness.

The easiest way to write a professional development case is to think of it as telling a story about a teaching dilemma that you experienced and that still puzzles you.

Jen lifted from her lap a spiral notebook on which a sheet of notebook paper rested. She waved the notebook and paper at me. “Yeah, it’s right here, Mr. Adams.”

“OK, great. Go ahead when you’re ready,” I replied, eager to hear her letter.

Jen paused for a moment, and let out a deep breath. “Dear Mother,” she began, “I am forever thinking of you this cloudy night, the eve of what may be the bloodiest battle yet in this horrid Civil War.” Jen continued to read her letter for the next few minutes.

The other students and I were awed by the letter that Jen had written from the point of view of a Union nurse. “My heart aches when I see those boys, poor mangled boys who have suffered so at the hands of evildoers,” she continued.

This was an outstanding letter, I thought. Vivid and heartfelt, it seemed as if Jen was actually channeling a real Union nurse’s lament to her mother back in Vermont. Even the nurse’s vocabulary and expressions were authentic to the period. But then, wait a minute, I thought. Jen was channeling a real nurse because this was a real nurse’s letter; I remembered reading an almost identical letter a few weeks before when I was preparing the primary source unit. It was on a Web site that popped up when I Googled Civil War primary sources. As Jen continued reading, I walked nonchalantly from the front of the room to my bookshelves in the back and casually sifted

through the small mountain of papers I had collected for the primary sources unit. There it was. I pulled out the letter I had printed off of the Internet from a Smithsonian Web site on primary sources. On the printout, I saw the words, "Mother, my strength comes from the Lord, as you always taught Martha and me as children growing up by the lake...", " at the same time as Jen was reading them aloud from "her" letter.

There may be multiple responses that are effective, and the best ones often depend upon a thorough understanding of the local conditions.

I thought of several ways to address Jen's plagiarism, including stopping her right in the middle of her reading and questioning her in front of the entire class. However, I knew that if this was going to be a learning experience for Jen, embarrassing her in front of her peers was not the best way for me to respond. As the bell rang and the students began to file out of the room, I approached Jen and said softly, "Jen, can you wait around a moment after class, I'd like to ask you about something?"

"But, Mr. Adams, I'll be late to P.E.," she said.

"I'll write you a note," I promised.

After the room had cleared out, I sat on a desk opposite Jen and asked, "Jen, where did you get the letter you wrote?"

"I wrote it last night," she stammered.

"Well, it's almost identical to one on the Smithsonian archives Web site." I paused, while Jen stared at me open mouthed and wide eyed.

"No I didn't, really," she whispered.

I felt then I had to be more direct and said, "Jen, the letters are virtually identical. You copied the letter off the Internet and then presented it as your own. That's plagiarism."

"But I was so busy yesterday!" Jen blurted. "We had softball tryouts, and then I had to go to my brother's violin recital, and then I worked on my science fair project," her voice growing louder and more panicked as she recited the litany of activities that kept her from her social studies

homework. "And besides, my mom knows I got it from the Internet."

Wow, I thought. Not only do I have to deal with Jen, but now Jen's mom is involved. How should I proceed?

Promoting Professional Development

To promote professional development, the preceding case about Mr. Adams, Jen, Jen's mom, and intellectual dishonesty should be presented by the facilitator following the guidelines in Figure 3. Especially critical are the key questions that the facilitator develops: They should stimulate inquiry, reflection, critical thinking, and problem solving. Examples of such questions include the following:

- What exactly was Jen at fault for here?
- What was the best time and context for Mr. Adams to talk to Jen?
- What should Mr. Adams have said to Jen?
- How should Jen have responded to Mr. Adams?
- What, if anything, should Mr. Adams say to Jen's mother?
- What can Mr. Adams do to prevent the situation from happening again?

Figure 3

Guidelines for Case Discussion Facilitator

1. Before presenting the case, plan several key questions to get the discussion started. Key questions should be open-ended and encourage teachers to look at the case from multiple perspectives.
2. Remind participants that a case discussion is a form of shared learning and they should be respectful of different opinions.
3. Remind participants that cases do not always have one perfect solution.
4. Ask participants to hold questions until the entire case has been read.
5. Read the case dramatically to stimulate interest but avoid passing judgment on anyone in the case.
6. Strive to build common understandings among the participants and place the case in a larger context, helping all to see the big picture.
7. Begin the discussion by asking the planned key questions and then let the discussion evolve as the participants ask their own questions and answer those posed by other participants. The participants, not the facilitator, should do most of the talking.
8. Ensure that the discussion remains positive and on-track, and that no one dominates it; if the discussion gets heated, remind participants of Guideline #2.
9. At the end of the discussion, summarize the key points emphasizing any guiding principles that participants can incorporate into their teaching.
10. Informally evaluate the case and the discussion by having participants anonymously answer a few short questions, such as "What aspects of the case and the discussion were most helpful to you?" and "How could I improve the discussion process?"

Figure 4

Resources on the Case Method

- Cooper, J. (1995) (Ed.). *Teachers' problem solving: A casebook of award-winning teaching cases*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
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The preceding case was “open” because it did not include an account of how the dilemma was actually resolved, particularly with respect to Jen’s mother. But the same case could easily have been “closed,” if that were desirable, by including the resolution of the dilemma. Figure 4 identifies several resources for using case-based learning.

In conclusion, case discussions promote professional relationships and provide instructional, emotional, and managerial support in middle school teaching. Case discussions can help teachers take charge of their own professional development and create a community of shared inquiry within their schools. Case discussions also help overcome the sense of isolation that many middle school teachers, particularly new ones, experience. By emphasizing the sharing of mutual expertise, case discussions forge strong bonds of professional membership.

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